
Humanitarian Daily Rations: Being Ready is Half the Battle

By

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Meals-ready-to-eat - better known as MREs - like Hummers and woodland pattern battledress designs, became popular military products of the 1980s. Lesser known than the MREs, however, is their first cousin, the humanitarian daily ration, the HDR.

The HDR was born of a recurring need in the nineties, to support multitudes of displaced or otherwise bereft populations, which seemed to bedevil almost every military contingency in which the U.S. participated. A little known adjunct of military operations is that the U.S. (or any military force) is obliged to maintain a degree of responsibility for civilians in areas over which it has control. From Panama to Kuwait, and from Kurdistan to Haiti, U.S. forces have been required to oversee the basic safety and health of the civilian population. But there has also emerged a requirement to provide ready-to-eat rations in non-combat situations where conventional relief programs are not feasible. These military relief missions are generally conducted as stopgap measures until more conventional relief programs can get under way or can be resumed.

Humanitarian daily rations have been used to bring relief to populations affected by either man-made or natural disasters. They have also been used to meet the subsistence needs of displaced civilians and refugees, such as Kurds, Cubans, Bosnians, Rwandans, and Haitians until they can be moved to more permanent facilities.

Humanitarian Daily Rations Development

While the MRE was developed for the nutritional needs of soldiers who must maintain a high level of physical activity, civilians who may recently have been near starvation have an entirely different set of nutritional needs. The DoD consulted a range of nutritional and relief experts in developing the requirements for the HDR, including USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, the World Food Program, the Center for Disease Control, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the Department of Agriculture, and the Army Surgeon General's Office.

As a result of their recommendations, the HDR was created to meet requirements for the widest range of cultural and religious dietary restrictions (e.g., it is meatless) to maintain the health of moderately malnourished recipients until normal or targeted feeding programs resume. The result of that process was the unveiling of the prototype HDR in 1993. It was developed as a less expensive alternative to the MRE; it costs only about 30 percent as much as its more calorie-rich cousin.

In the first year of production, MREs were procured by DoD for humanitarian relief operations in Bosnia. They were so well received that they were procured as a general humanitarian support product on a continuing basis.

Advantages of HDRs

While not the preferred method, HDRs, like MREs, can be airdropped en masse, and unlike other products, they can be dropped via the Triad system as individual packets, which flutter to the ground relatively harmlessly. The Triad system is ideal for airdrops in regions with many hungry displaced people, since it permits wide dispersal and discourages hoarding and fighting which often accompany the delivery of larger pallet-sized loads. The Triad drops decrease the dangers to people on the ground posed by heavy air dropped items. The ability to handle many smaller packages also has reduced administrative and distribution costs.

Humanitarian daily rations are stored in temperature controlled warehouses in key DoD installations in the continental U.S. The cost for maintaining the HDR stocks relatively low. The basic unit (3 meals) costs \$4.25, plus storage costs at DoD warehouses and the cost of transporting HDRs to the recipient country.

Humanitarian Daily Rations to Sierra Leone

When fighting erupted again in Sierra Leone last summer, refugees started flowing from that war torn country to Forecaria, Guinea. Over 200 people a day were streaming into hastily erected refugee camps. But there was simply not enough food in that poor country to sustain such an influx. The World Food Program asked for immediate aid, and the U.S. government responded. The State Department requested that the DoD deliver adequate numbers of HDRs for distribution within the camps. By the end of September 2000, over 60,000 units had been delivered and had helped blunt the threat of imminent starvation in the camps.

Since their creation in 1993, approximately 8 million HDRs have been delivered to assist with the feeding of millions of displaced people worldwide. The results have been dramatic. This program has, of course, saved the lives of many a starving child or mother, but it has also freed up U.S. military and diplomatic assets to be applied to more direct action, thus relieving commanders and ambassadors of an extra burden. In most cases, DoD humanitarian assistance funds have paid for the transportation costs, though recently, the Department of State (DoS) and the United Nations have paid distribution costs.

About the Author

Judith McCallum is a Transportation Analyst and Program Manager for the Humanitarian Assistance Programs with responsibility for Disaster Relief Officer Funded Transportation Program, Denton (space available) Program, Humanitarian Daily Ration (HDR) Program and the U.S. Joint Forces Command. She has twenty years U.S. government service including six years experience in U.S. Humanitarian Assistance Programs. She has been involved with the Women's Executive Leadership Program and is a U.S. Army veteran.